

The government should focus more on attitudes to language, Bangor University research finds

Data from a Welsh language use survey shows low rates of language use among Welsh-speaking adults

By Meilyr Jones

Meilyr Jones is part of Bangor University's language attitudes research team. He says the government's over-reliance on education as a medium of language revival could lead to a situation similar to the one facing Gaelic...

Data from the Welsh language use survey shows low rates of language use among Welsh-speaking adults. This is a particular area of concern in government policies as the Cymraeg 2050 strategy aims to double the percentage of daily use of Welsh.

The reluctance to use Welsh depicted here is also reflected in the decline in intergenerational family transmission, which is perhaps the single most important factor to language survival. Research has highlighted that the government's over-reliance on education as a medium of language revival, without initiatives to tackle language use, particularly in the family, could lead to a situation similar to that faced by Gaelic.

The importance of attitudes

Regenerating a minority language must include a change in attitudes to the language. While the policymakers behind the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 strategy identify "normalising perception and use" as a key challenge to tackle, the Cymraeg 2050 strategy does not discuss the need to improve attitudes per se. Nevertheless, attitudes play a central role in successfully sustaining a language, which is why we believe that greater emphasis must be placed on improving attitudes to the language in Wales.

Our research looks at the relationship between explicit and implicit language attitudes and exposure to Welsh in north-west Wales. We have done this by comparing data about speakers' background from the Language and Social Background Questionnaire with the results of the Attitudes towards Languages (AToL) Scale and an Implicit Association Task.

Contribution of early exposure

Our results show that speakers have more favourable attitudes towards Welsh than English. Therefore, contrary to the current landscape of declining use and exposure to Welsh in Wales, bilingual speakers' explicit attitudes towards Welsh remain positive. Furthermore, speakers with more exposure to Welsh in primary school age have more favourable attitudes towards Welsh than those with less exposure, who tend to prefer English. These results demonstrate the importance of exposure to language in fostering positive, implicit attitudes towards Welsh.

Our results suggest that early exposure may do more than equip children with the language skills they need to use – a function that education, too, can successfully fulfil. What early exposure can provide beyond language skills is modelling the use of the Welsh language in a wide range of community contexts. This is in line with research in other areas – such as physical activity and sleep patterns – where behavioural modelling plays a fundamental role in influencing children's behaviour.

Implications

The lack of modelling that is part of some children's experience is therefore particularly relevant in considering the context of the decline in exposure to the Welsh language due to declining social use and intergenerational family transmission.

Given the Welsh Government's current target to double the use of Welsh in areas such as work and social situations, this suggests that preventing a decline in social use of Welsh and, in particular, intergenerational transmission within the family, is essential to improving implicit attitudes towards Welsh. It should be seen as a priority for Welsh

Government language policy. Doing this in areas such as north-west Wales, which is currently going through a linguistic shift, should be crucial.

If current patterns of decline continue, a decline in exposure could lead to less favourable implicit attitudes towards the Welsh language, highlighting the importance of exposure to the Welsh language in the home and community for the future vitality of the Welsh language.

Improving implicit attitudes towards Welsh is significant from a language revival perspective because implicit attitudes seem better predictors of normal behaviour than explicit attitudes, that is, the speaker's likelihood of using the language. Therefore, we suggest that implicit attitudes and their potential impact on use should receive more attention from Welsh language researchers and policymakers alike.

Work on future attitudes to language should involve direct and indirect approaches, particularly in other areas of Wales where there is less exposure to Welsh, and in assessing the vitality of language in general.

